

Is Pastoralism Still Viable in the Horn of Africa?

New Perspectives from Ethiopia

"The ability of the Somali Region economy to generate wealth is not in doubt. It is the variability of income generation and asset ownership, and the consequent vulnerability of groups of people within the region, that must be addressed." This is one of the primary conclusions of a forthcoming report into the causes and consequences of livelihood vulnerability in the Somali region of Ethiopia, a two-year study led by the UK Institute of Development studies (IDS) and commissioned by the UNOCHA Pastoralist Communication Initiative (UNOCHA-PCI). Its conclusions, which imply that with the right support, the pastoral economy can thrive and contribute extensively to the national economy, are applicable across the arid and semi-arid areas of the Horn of Africa. But pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, farmers and traders have suffered from a series of livelihood shocks, some natural (droughts, livestock diseases), others political (crackdowns on informal trade, bans by Gulf states on livestock imports, banditry and conflict). As a result, and because rainfall in the Horn has been low in recent years, questions are being asked about the sustainability of pastoralism as a livelihood system. Thousands of people, whose voices have been collected in this rigorous study, argue that the system is dynamic and sustainable, but needs support and diversification to reduce livelihood vulnerability¹.

Sources of Vulnerability

"Drought triggers livelihood crises, but the underlying causes of vulnerability in the Somali region of Ethiopia are social and political, not natural." The impact of drought on rural livelihoods is multi-dimensional. Pastoralists lose livestock, while farmers and agro-pastoralists lose their harvest. Other livelihoods that depend on pastoralist and agricultural incomes, such as traders and service providers, also report facing declining incomes in drought years due to falling demand for their goods and services. On the other hand, droughts are part of the natural cycle in semi-arid areas, and local livelihoods are sensitively adapted to the certainty that drought will come and can be overcome.

Many people believe that droughts are more frequent than in the past, but analysis of long term rainfall data for Somali Region does not support this perception. A marginal decline in rainfall is observed in the northern part of the region since the 1950s, but in the much drier central zones average rainfall has actually increased since the 1970s. The defining characteristic of rainfall in arid and semi-arid areas is its variability from year to year, and there is no evidence that the recent sequence of localised droughts represents a permanent decline in average rainfall. If vulnerability to drought is increasing, the reasons have to do with inadequate support to economic,

social and political coping mechanisms, rather than increasingly frequent or abnormally severe drought events.

After drought, conflict is another major source of vulnerability. An indirect effect of conflict is expressed by the Somali word *aabsi* ('fear of conflict'), which results in migration routes being disrupted, services not being delivered and large tracts of contested arable or grazing land lying unutilised for years.

Photo: UNOCHA Ethiopia



¹ The report gives voice to the people of Somali Region themselves, and presents this evidence to policy makers. The approach included a questionnaire survey of 1,100 households in nine rural districts and two urban centres across the region, ethnographic methods, market monitoring and interviews with local leaders, members of government, traders and internally displaced persons.

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Poor governance is a third source of vulnerability. It increases difficulties in many ways - notably, by threatening peace and security, obstructing trade and economic activity, and undermining social protection. Unfortunately, the actions of local leaders, governments and aid agencies often unknowingly exacerbate vulnerability. People in Somali Region say they feel that government is often ineffective and that their interests are not adequately represented at any level - local or national.

Some Statistics from the Research ...

(From Somali Region, Ethiopia)

% rural households rearing livestock	86
Average most recent harvest per farming household (kg)	527
Annual turnover in just four livestock markets (US\$ million)	14
Annual livestock exported from just two markets (thousand heads)	273
% business closures in Shilabo town in 2005	62
Female MP's in regional parliament	1
Kg food aid per household (2004)	14
% of rural households receiving loans/gifts of milking animals	65
% literacy	18
% access to health services (rural)	6
% access to health services (urban)	96

Responses to Vulnerability

Cycles of accumulation, collapse and rebuilding are defining features of the pastoralist way of life, but recent shocks and stresses may be stretching coping capacities in the Horn's arid and semi-arid lands to breaking point. Rationing of food consumption is an immediate and almost universal response to shortage, as it is costless and easily reversible. The second most popular response is to call on support from relatives and a range of traditional institutions in pastoral culture. These are vital mechanisms for pooling and reducing risk, but many people complain that they are declining, in response to recurrent shocks and social change - the perception is that people are both less able and less willing to help each other than in the past.

Formal safety nets tend to emphasise deliveries of emergency food aid, which have risen dramatically in recent years. At the aggregate level, this has been enough to depress local food prices - creating disincentives for local traders and farmers - but for beneficiary households the amount of food actually received is often trivial. Beneficiaries are asking for different types of safety net assistance (cash transfers, livestock restocking), or even for 'developmental' needs to be prioritised instead (support for livelihood diversification, investment in education and health services). Better designed, more innovative and effectively implemented social protection is vital, not just to provide a safety net in times of crisis, but to provide reassurance that it will be there when needed.

The poor quality and limited accessibility of health services in Somali Region is demonstrated by high numbers of preventable deaths due to untreated illness, inadequate immunisation coverage, hunger-related disease, and deaths of mothers and infants in childbirth. Vulnerability in these areas is highly gendered. Almost one in four deaths recorded in the survey occurred in childbirth, an indictment of the lack of reproductive healthcare in the region. Girls are more likely to die young than are boys, and men live longer than women.

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Livestock marketing and trade, mainly across the border with Somalia and into the Gulf states, generates enormous revenues for livestock owners, traders and marketing agents. Trading is vibrant and complex, involving many more commodities than livestock; imports as well as exports. The informal marketing system is unregulated, but sophisticated. When it is functioning well, it contributes strongly to reducing vulnerability for many; however returns are extremely unpredictable. This reflects the paradox of wealth plus vulnerability that is identified in this research as a defining feature of livelihoods in Somali Region.

New Approaches

Governments and agencies have yet to find effective broad-based solutions to the complex natural and political vulnerabilities of their pastoral economies. Such solutions will be found not in isolated projects or programmes, but in the wider environment and policy spaces within which people construct their livelihoods. Trade, for instance, is arguably the most lucrative source of income across all sectors of the drylands economy, but legal constraints are stifling trade rather than maximising the potential of internal and cross-border trade to generate household incomes and government revenue.

Supporting viable livelihoods in pastoral economies requires expanding people's options, supporting the co-operation between pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, farmers, traders and urban dwellers and maximising - not restricting - their physical, economic and social mobility. It requires that they be treated not as victims, but as capable people already engaged in developing their livelihoods in the light of continuous economic, political and social change.

The IDS research report, **Vulnerable Livelihoods in Somali Region, Ethiopia**, will be available in May 2006.

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